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ABSTRACT

To help students learn important reading skills and habits and become independent learners, remedial reading laboratories should begin at the level of the student's competence, provide ample practice in reading and language skills, and provide immediate feedback and evaluation. The University of Idaho Learning Resource Center supplements the remedial reading/writing course with laboratories that provide small groups of students with verbal practice in areas related to reading. The laboratories involve students in a variety of activities, including reading aloud lists of words and sentences that call attention to stress, pitch, and juncture; learning about the function of sentence parts through arranging nonsense words with clear function indicators, or long strings of English words, into sentences; role-playing brief dialogues; reading passages that demonstrate the importance of accurate punctuation; rephrasing active sentence constructions into passive constructions; learning about language history; working on vocabulary development; and learning methods of critical reading and television viewing. The success of the laboratories demonstrates that remedial reading supplements can be both enjoyable and significant. (GW)

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Laughin and Talkin' and Carryin' on: The (Highly) Verbal Remedial Reading Lab

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The experienced reading teacher, reflecting upon the qualities that differentiate capable readers, can reinterpret the philosopher to exclaim, "I think, therefore I can read." Exploring the conditions requisite for effective reading, theorists and researchers have recently found themselves in agreement on the importance of clear, self-directed thinking to retention. Outlining while reading, posing questions, forming expectations are a few of the skills that have been taught in order to engage student and material. We also suspect a relationship between reading and the student's habits, confidence, even sense of control over his or her environment and self (Morgan and Culver, 1). Good reading, it is clear, implies much more than the acquisition of traditionally taught skills.

Furthermore, those who philosophize on the larger intent of a college education remind us that reading is an empowering skill intended to provide the factual resources for discriminating judgement and cogent argument. Humanist educators recognize that the intentional, deliberative reader and forceful speaker is also self-generative, able to discover and explore his or her own

greatest dimensions. How do we approach such grand goals in our modest labs and classrooms? To start, both our process of teaching and the content of instruction can encourage growth toward self-direction and independent learning. We should begin at the level of the student's competence, provide media for practice that de-emphasize penalties for false or imperfect efforts, and provide ample practice. Additionally, improvement requires recognition and rejection of less appropriate responses and products, which necessitates immediate feedback and evaluation.

The strategy we chose at the University of Idaho Learning Resource Center was to develop expressive skills as an adjunct to our remedial reading/writing course. These labs are designed to provide verbal practice for groups of 6-8 students in areas related to reading, in an informal atmosphere with minimal supervision. The class itself is taught by group instruction, covering a fairly standard range of topics, including reading comprehension, paraphrasing, spelling, grammar and usage, paragraph organization, basic rhetorical strategies, logic and critical reading. The class meets three times weekly with activities varied from small and large group discussion to game-like exercises. To supplement class discussion, which depends, as do most classes, upon volunteer participation, the once-weekly labs require verbal participation of each student. Lab topics correspond to classroom topics and combine an informal tone with a careful sequence of activities.

Labs are a combination of pre-reading/writing, awareness-building activities and reinforcement-practice. Preliminary, awareness-building activities include the listening/speaking

exercises, spelling preparation, punctuation exercises, and sentence building. Reinforcement practice is built into vocabulary, word choice and logic exercises.

As a preparation for spelling instruction, students practice reading aloud lists of commonly slurred expressions and mispronounced words. Tongue-twister sentences are presented as the sententious pronouncements of radio announcers to encourage deliberate enunciation. In a follow-up lab, students become aware of stress, pitch and juncture. Familiar names, those of selected pop culture figures and their own names, are pronounced to emphasized stress. Next, students read aloud sentences whose meaning varies with the word stressed. Pitch is recorded in musical staves while students read each other several phrases and sentences. Word pairs, such as "weekend/week end", are read aloud to illustrate the function of variation in juncture. Subsequent sentences with similar meaning but varying punctuation demonstrate that punctuation records juncture, which in turn reflects and aids interpretation within the sentence. A contrast between oral and written expression is pointed out by having students read sentences that could function as essay topics. Where a speaker can suggest subtle meaning by stressing certain words in the sentence, the writer must explain carefully. In the sentence "This is her best work," for instance, the speaker may use a sarcastic tone and emphasis on "This" to suggest a good deal about the quality of the rest of the work, whereas the writer must explain why this particular piece is better.

A number of lab activities are aimed at developing awareness of the function of various parts of the sentence and the variety of forms available to express any single idea. Rules and detailed labels are avoided. One activity begins with two sets of words, one of which is nonsense words with clear function indicators, such as "brindled" for a verb. The second set is English words without indicatives or other essentials for a true sentence. Given the nonsense words first, students are told that this is a Martian message which they are to order and assign meaning to. After initial dismay, the group is able to create a reasonable sentence. The discussion afterwards points out how much "sentence sense" students have already gained. The mismatched group of words simply emphasizes that a collection of related English words does not necessarily make a good sentence - seemingly minor words like "a" and "in" are essential to meaning. A teacher-made card game provides an opportunity for discussing variation within the sentence in an enjoyable atmosphere. An excessively long sentence, written one word to a card, is dealt out to students, four cards per player. The game is "seeded" with a subject-verb-starter with the first word of the sentence or the article "the". Students can play any word card that can logically be placed next to another card. A supply of punctuation cards is available at all times and any player can, during his or her turn, rearrange laid-out cards to allow for playing a new card. Students draw replacement cards from the pack, and earn one point for each word added to the sentence. Much lively talk ensues. Is it proper to attach

another prepositional phrase to that already overburdened noun? Finally, each of the two or more teams is given a full set of cards to create the largest number of sentences possible in a time limit, say five minutes. This sentence recognition and manipulation exercise is followed by one giving students an opportunity to build from a brief core sentence. Each student, by turns, adds on a prepositional phrase, infinitive, participle, subordinate clause of adverb/adjective modifiers, verbalizing the total accumulated sentence while others record the addition. The assassination version allows the student having a turn to dictate the part of speech that must be added by the next player.

To illustrate how the nature of a message determines sentence structure, students role-play brief dialogues. Students can contrast, for instance, the difference between a speaker taking responsibility for some event or action and the speaker refusing to appear responsible. As the facilitator or a group member records the conversations, students can see sentence variants emerge out of situation.

A number of language awareness exercises are intended to prepare students for paragraph writing, which is an integral part of the class. To emphasize the usage is a convention rather than a set of immutable 'rules', one punctuation exercise takes the form of a group experiment. One student reads a transcript passage while others, given a transcript with less punctuation, fill in commas and end-stops. Rather than evaluate in terms of right or wrong, the transcripts are compared, punctuation preferences tallied to find areas of agreement. As a follow-up

assignment students each write the longest possible sentence they can compose without need of punctuation. At the beginning of the next class they read their sentences aloud for group decision on whether the meaning is in fact clear without punctuation.

Since the recognition of faulty or murky language usage is always difficult for these students, the activity on passive sentence construction is intended to provide practice in deliberately producing passive style writing. Students begin with a familiar story, such as the "Three Little Pigs" and take turns rephrasing each incident into a passive sentence form. The final story is read aloud and compared to a teacher-made version. The deadening effect of the style convinces student that the style should be used only when appropriate to the sense.

A class discussion on language history is followed by reading and translating a short story written in pun, intended to simulate the experience of reading Egyptian hieroglyphics, which often used a symbol to represent several words with similar pronunciation but widely varying meaning.

Although vocabulary development must be necessarily sketchy and introductory in a class that covers such a range of skills, we do supplement the standard context-clue, word analysis skill areas. Paperback copies of Roget's Thesaurus are used to develop sensitivity to the range of meaning associated with any word. For one exercise, students select any Thesaurus entry with five or more synonyms, look up the definition of each, then order the

synonyms in some defensible way, such as increasing intensity, neutral to negative, or increasing formality of language. The greatest benefit of this exercise is the willingness of students to use a word source book that is not encumbered with difficult symbols, abbreviations and complex entries. A subsequent exercise has them take their words home and look up the etymolygy of each word. Another homework assignment is the "word report," for which they select their own word, research the word in the largest dictionary available and prepare a short report in as interesting a fashion as possible. A course that focussed more specifically on vocabulary would probably use the word report as a regular weekly feature of lab or class.

Labs relating to critical reading, like the corresponding classes, rely upon a combination of contemporary media and literary sources. One class period introduces the subject with the oral reading of a Max Shulman story, "Love is a Fallacy." The subsequent lab utilizes analysis of the logical fallacies found in the story. Next, students examine pictures taken from magazines and other sources in order to decide what assumptions, if any, they could make. Application of logic and the identification of bias is made to television commercials in the following class period. Students watch an hour's TV together, assigned to watch for various elements according to their lab group; one in each group writes down background setting, voices only, words of jingles, dialogue and voice-overs, clothing of models or action and relationships between models. In lab, each group compares notes and creates a composite poster-

size analysis of the appeals and methods of persuasion.

With its careful sequence, continuous oral emphasis and intentional movement of students through the cognitive domain to critical, evaluative reading and observing, the lab demonstrates that remedial reading supplements can be both enjoyable and significant. The program is also cost and time effective; students need little or no supervision for most sessions. Two informal measures indicate the success of the class, which is composed primarily of the highly insecure, the late bloomers and the culturally different. Success in subsequent classes, especially English composition, is high, as is retention in general. And student evaluations are significantly higher than evaluations in other classes with the same instructor. Students frequently report increased confidence in their studies, a lasting benefit of learning to think more effectively before, during and after their reading.

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